

ITALIAN HOME OF THE D'ISRAELIS

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Such is Benjamin Disraeli's story of the vicissitudes of his family, such the background of historic truth and genealogical legend in which he sought his connexion with the larger vicissitudes of his race. In these ancestral matters we are most of us prone to mistake possibilities for probabilities, and to rear grandiose theories on a very slender foundation of fact. Disraeli was no exception to the rule: indeed, all his days he was haunted, more than most men, by a longing to escape from the sordid details of commonplace life into spacious historical atmospheres. In the present instance he had probably very little precise knowledge to cool his ardent imagination. His father, in spite of his multifarious curiosity, appears never to have troubled himself about his own family antecedents, and Benjamin D'Israeli the elder died before his grandson was of an age to have his curiosity awakened. It need not then surprise us to find that criticism has been busy with the narrative which has just been given. The tradition of an ancestor who took part in the great Jewish exodus from Spain, in the time of Ferdinand and Isabella may or may not be well founded, but it is not supported by any independent evidence. The story of the long sojourn in Venice is even more open to suspicion; no trace of the family having been discovered in Venetian archives till a period subsequent to the migration to England. What we know for certain is that the grandfather Benjamin D'Israeli, who 'became an English denizen in 1748,' had his Italian home not in Venice but at Cento in Ferrara¹: we know also that a Jewish colony, no doubt mainly of Levantine origin, existed in Ferrara before the Spanish exodus, but that it was largely reinforced

¹ In his formal deed of denization in England, dated 1801, he described himself as 'of Cento in Italy.' Cento is best known as the birthplace of the painter Guercino, and it is worthy of note that among the possessions of the D'Israeli family were a couple of pictures by that master which Lord Beaconsfield used to say had been a wedding present to his grandfather from an Italian friend.